

“Worse in singularity”?: Kant, Derrida and aesthetics in Margaret Cavendish’s *The Blazing World*

In discussions of Margaret Cavendish and her novel *The Blazing World* (1666), one word reappears again and again: singularity. Borrowed from Cavendish herself, the term is used by her contemporaries and by modern critics to indicate the eccentricity of her life and work. It has proven to be usefully multivalent. John Evelyn’s 1667 description of Cavendish’s “extravagant humour and dress, which was very singular” is well known, and it was difficult for contemporaries of Cavendish to resist applying their opinions of her person to their opinions of her work.¹ Mary Evelyn, wife of John, offers a characteristic example in a letter of the same year, describing Cavendish in person as “airy, empty, whimsical, and rambling as her books, aiming at science, difficulties, high notions, [but] terminating in nonsense, oaths, and obscenity.”² Following this lead, some critics have read Cavendish’s singularity as an aggressive selfishness responsible for the production of work that barely rises above the level of gibberish. For example, Emma Rees refers to Cavendish’s “singularity of the self, that aggrandising, almost dictatorial self-representation which has been seen to colour most of her works.”³ In a similar vein to Mary Evelyn, Sara Heller Mendelson calls Cavendish’s ideas “obscure and contradictory,”⁴ while for Janet Todd, her work is “rambling, repetitive, inconsistent and contradictory.”⁵ Referring to *The Blazing World*, Frank and Fritzie Manuel argue that a utopia must have “generality, if not universality, or it becomes merely a narcissistic yearning.”⁶ As Lisa T. Sarasohn remarks, “Cavendish used both her writing and her person to evoke astonishment and even repugnance in her audience,” and this repugnance has proven remarkably long-lived.⁷

However, for Cavendish herself singularity is a statement of proud self-assurance, as when, in *The Blazing World*, a character modelled on Cavendish remarks “I endeavour . . . to be as singular as I can.”⁸ In recent years some critics have adopted this more positive usage. Writing about the protagonist of *The Blazing World*, Rachel Trubowitz suggests that “as a female author Cavendish achieves in the act of writing the same imperial singularity as her Empress;”⁹ Oddvar

Holmesland argues that Cavendish's "idea of singularity seems closely linked to attaining the privilege of a naturally artistic freedom;"¹⁰ while Kate Lilley adds "Every invention and description of a fantastical compound authorises the Duchess's text and personal singularity as authentically poetic."¹¹ In what follows I will offer a framework by which to comprehend exactly how Cavendish achieves the positive singularity to which these critics allude, and show that only by properly understanding her so-called self-indulgence can a full appreciation of Cavendish's achievement be attained. Derek Attridge has done much to reclaim the term by suggesting that singularity, which he finds in all art that goes "beyond the possibilities pre-programmed by a culture's norms," be seen as the preeminent quality of literature.¹² As he acknowledges, the term was often used in a pejorative sense in the seventeenth century, and the disapproval associated with it seems never to have entirely left Cavendish's reputation. Attridge's singularity, like much work on aesthetics, is itself grounded in Immanuel Kant's notions of genius and exemplary originality and, as I will demonstrate, the principles that underlie Cavendish's novel in fact have a great deal in common with Kant's third critique, the *Critique of Judgement*—one of the cornerstones of western aesthetic theory. Kant's understanding of fine art, genius, and mimesis helps to refocus interpretations of *The Blazing World* so that its singularity can be properly understood not as a freakish, undesirable effect of Cavendish's self-obsession, but as a quality proper to all works of literature.

Writing about seventeenth-century views of authorship, Jeffrey Masten notes that in her plays Cavendish "inscribes discourses that have become more familiar in the author's subsequent domain and reign: the self-sufficient, 'naturall' organicism of the home-grown genius; authorship as cottage industry."¹³ One of my aims in this essay is to extend and clarify this point. By reassessing *The Blazing World* in the light of Kantian aesthetics, I will demonstrate that Cavendish's work can be seen to prefigure the Romantic discourses of authorship that Masten alludes to because it conforms to Kantian ideas of genius that have influenced those very discourses.¹⁴ However, although I will draw attention to some commonalities of their thought, I do not claim that Cavendish was a Kantian *avant la lettre*. To do so would be to fall foul of what Alan Sinfield has

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called “the *affirmative habit* of literary criticism” in which “the critic will indulge in whatever strenuous reading is necessary is to get the . . . text onto his or her side.”¹⁵ Instead I use Kant’s ideas, either directly or as developed by Jacques Derrida in his re-reading of the third critique, in order to offer a re-framing of Cavendish’s work. The affirmative claim I *will* make is this: with the aid of Kant and Derrida, the extravagance that critics have identified as central to Cavendish’s work and persona is revealed as an exuberant artistic liberality. Thus it is not selfishness that underpins Cavendish’s aesthetics, but generosity—and that generosity is in keeping with her desire to be recognized as the preeminent female patron of her age. Ultimately, Cavendish’s approaches to aesthetics and patronage are united in a concept of benevolent friendship that, while looking back to ancient models, also adopts a distinctive interpretation of amity that is singularly her own.

Singularity and Disgust

In brief, *The Blazing World* relates the arrival of a woman on an alien planet, her marriage to its Emperor, her discussions with its scientists and theologians, her friendship with a character called the Duchess of Newcastle (Cavendish’s own title), and her use of advanced technology to defend her home country. The novel therefore addresses science, gender, royalist politics, religion, narrativity and subjectivity—it sits, spider-like, at the center of a web of provocative connections. The arachnid analogy is prompted by Cavendish herself since, as Sylvia Bowerbank points out, Cavendish repeatedly uses spider imagery to account for her aesthetic practice.¹⁶ However, the generative capacity of this creature has not always been understood in a positive light. Bowerbank compares Cavendish unfavorably to the spider in Jonathan Swift’s *Battle of the Books*, a text that stages a debate between a bee and a spider, the former a representative of neoclassical aesthetics, the latter a modern subjectivist. Suggesting that Cavendish’s work echoes the approach of the dangerously self-indulgent arachnid, Bowerbank quotes Swift’s bee, who accuses the spider of a productivity “which feeding and engendering on itself, turns all into excrement and venom.”¹⁷ Although she does not apply this assessment to Cavendish’s entire oeuvre, Bowerbank’s view of

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The Blazing World remains largely negative: for her its plot is “tedious chaos,” its prose “oblivion,” its whole design a “retreat into fantasy.”¹⁸ Such a judgment is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s better-known dismissal of Cavendish in *A Room of One’s Own*, where Woolf remarks “what a vision of loneliness and riot the thought of Margaret Cavendish brings to mind! as if some giant cucumber had spread itself over all the roses and carnations in the garden and choked them to death.”¹⁹ She goes on to lament that Cavendish “should have frittered her time away scribbling nonsense and plunging ever deeper into obscurity.”²⁰ Such descriptions draw attention to the supposed failings of Cavendish’s singularity, characterized here as an egocentric disregard for basic intelligibility. Woolf and Bowerbank suggest that in writing *The Blazing World* Cavendish was concerned only with the satiation of her own peculiar desires, and thus produced a text that could have no meaning for any reader other than herself. Moreover, the visceral terms of their disapproval, which sees Cavendish as the spider that cannibalizes itself to produce filth and poison, or the riotously narcissistic cucumber that strangles more appealing plants, encourages a sense that Cavendish’s singularity is not merely flawed but actively disgusting. This is further emphasized by the phallic implications of the cucumber image and the phrase “loneliness and riot,” which taken together suggest that, for Woolf, Cavendish’s writing is not only problematically “masculine” but also positively masturbatory.

Cavendish’s singularity is thus accused of being both self-indulgent and disgusting, and I will address each of these claims in turn. Cavendish’s emphasis on her singularity has been read as a form of narcissistic pride that causes a destructive separation from the mainstream of the western literary tradition, and in the extract that follows both form and content evoke the qualities that have met with such disapproval. Indeed, even a mere description of the passage evokes this, for it contains a trio of Margaret Cavendish avatars. Direct speech comes from the Duchess of Newcastle—in other words, Cavendish—who is in conversation with the Empress of the Blazing World, herself a further transparent incarnation of Cavendish. Both are watched over by a narrative voice that identifies itself as a third Cavendish in the text’s prologue and epilogue:

I endeavour, said she, to be as singular as I can: for it argues but a mean nature to imitate others; and though I do not love to be imitated if I can possibly avoid it; yet rather than imitate others, I should choose to be imitated by others; for my nature is such, that I had rather appear worse in singularity, then better in the mode.²¹

Cavendish's appeals to "nature" here are significant, and various interpretations of what "my nature" might amount to have been proposed. Taking what she calls a "psychological approach," Judith Kegan Gardiner diagnoses Cavendish as a narcissist who experienced both a fear of, and intense desire for, exhibitionism.²² While Gardiner's methodology may not be unproblematic, the kind of investigation she undertakes is certainly invited by the autobiographical presence of Cavendish within her own writings. Gardiner's essay is useful because it argues that, far from being an unconscious and malign influence within Cavendish's work, narcissism is in fact seen as a substantial good: "throughout Cavendish's writings, self-love is presented as the source of the cosmos, religion, virtue, politics, and love for others."²³ This is made clear, Gardiner notes, through the emphasis in *The Blazing World* on the selfish glories of literary creation. As Cavendish, in the guise of author, states in one of the novel's oft-quoted passages,

though I cannot be *Henry* the Fifth or *Charles* the Second, yet I endeavour to be *Margaret* the *First*; and although I have neither power, time nor occasion to conquer the world as *Alexander* and *Caesar* did; yet rather than not to be mistress of one, since Fortune and the Fates would give me none, I have made a world of my own.²⁴

By acknowledging her ambition, but also the harmlessness of its fantastical direction, Cavendish seeks to ameliorate the harm that her singularity could be said to cause. Returning to Cavendish's three-fold self-depiction, Lee Cullen Khanna remarks, "instead of condemning her solipsism . . . , we may see her depiction of internal difference as a route to imaginative energy."²⁵

A further reading of Cavendish's "nature" is offered by Catherine Gallagher. For her, Cavendish's self-assertion stakes a proto-feminist claim for the absolute sovereignty of the aristocratic woman who experiences "exclusion from political subjecthood."²⁶ Gallagher argues that

Cavendish's assertion of singularity arises from her recognition that women held no office in the commonwealth, swore no Oath of Supremacy and thus were free to make "sovereigns" of themselves. Gallagher suggests that Cavendish ignored the politically revolutionary potential of this observation and saw it instead as a prompt for microcosmical thinking: she would not repudiate Charles II, with whom she had gone into exile during the interregnum, but instead model his absolute self-completeness in herself and express it through *The Blazing World*.²⁷ This is the very opposite of the kind of imitation that would testify to what Cavendish calls "a mean nature;" rather it is a mark of the depth of Cavendish's self-confidence. In the epilogue she returns to the connections she drew between herself and male leaders in the prologue, but here the contrasts are drawn out more pointedly:

By this poetical description, you may perceive, that my ambition is not only to be Empress, but Authoress of a whole world . . . which creation was more easily and suddenly effected, than the conquests of the two famous monarchs of the world, Alexander and Caesar: neither have I made such disturbances, and caused so many . . . deaths, as they did.²⁸

Such pronouncements demonstrate that the conceptual framework in which Cavendish places her literary project is a creative one first, and an imperial one second. While she represents herself as a singular absolute Empress in the tradition of rulers of the ancient and modern world, she emphasizes more strongly her role as an authoress who has brought life, not death, to her imaginary world. Whereas Alexander, Caesar and, to a much lesser extent, Henry V and Charles II reshaped the real world by enacting their often violent wills, Cavendish shapes a world out of her will and peoples it with the creatures of her imagination, all without harming a fly. As I will show, this is not narcissism but, in Kantian terms, the singularly generous spark of creative genius.

The second charge levelled against Cavendish—that her work is disgusting—does not seem to be a judgment on any particular event that occurs in *The Blazing World*. Rather, Bowerbank refers to plot, prose, and conception, while Woolf alludes more generally to Cavendish's style.²⁹ There is, nevertheless, one moment in the novel that might well be called disgusting. During the

lengthy central section of the text in which the Empress questions a variety of her new world's scientists, we learn that a remarkable gum is used by the ruling classes to preserve their youth. The effects of this gum are described in some detail:

it being given every day for some certain time to an old decayed man, in the bigness of a little pea, will first make him spit for a week or more; after this, it will cause vomits of phlegm, and after that it will bring forth by vomits, humours of several colours: first of a pale yellow, then of a deep yellow, then of a green, and lastly of a black colour; and each of these humours have a several taste, some are fresh, some salt, some sour, some bitter, and so forth; neither do all these vomits make them sick, but they come out on a sudden and unawares, without any pain or trouble to the patient . . . then it works upon the brain, and brings forth of the nose such kind of humours as it did out of the mouth, and much after the same manner; then it will purge by stool, then by urine, then by sweat, and lastly by bleeding at the nose, and the emeroids . . . lastly, when it has done all this, it will make the body break out into a thick scab, and cause both hair, teeth and nails to come off; which scab being arrived to full maturity, opens first along the back, and comes off all in a piece like an armour.³⁰

The passage includes a litany of bodily products and conditions that invoke disgust: phlegm, vomit, mucus, feces, urine, sweat, blood, hemorrhoids, discarded hair, teeth and nails, and a body-sized scab. And yet Cavendish's narrator makes no concessions to this, presenting the information in a matter-of-fact and positive manner, breaking off from the description only to emphasize, unconvincingly, how trouble-free and painless the experience is. The outcome of this disgusting process is highly desirable, of course, since those who go through it are restored to their youthful good looks and gifted with two or three centuries of extra life, but the complete failure to acknowledge the unpleasantness of this description is nevertheless striking. Indeed, the passage achieves a great deal of its power through the narrator's insistence on not turning away from the unpleasantness of what is being described. As in much of *The Blazing World*, the writing here is

excessive, lurid, and singular—like the purgation of humors it describes, it overflows the measure of the appropriate. It is perhaps, therefore, not surprising that the novel caused, and continues to cause, readers to react with hostility. However, this passage is not just a useful example of the provocative elements of *The Blazing World*. It stands, more significantly, as a key to the aesthetic framework through which Cavendish's novel can be understood. Like the effects of the medicinal gum, the singular and uncomfortable aspects of the work must be understood as part of a process with a highly beneficial result. That result is defined and clarified by Kant and Derrida in their work on the aesthetics of beauty and disgust.

In the *Critique of Judgement*, after an extended discussion of the natural world, Kant turns his attention to art and the artist, and spends some time setting out the relationship between creativity and nature. Kant is interested, among other things, in what can or cannot be said to belong to the "fine arts," and he acknowledges that those arts have no difficulty in representing as beautiful scenes that, were they to occur in real life, would be considered unpleasant. However, there is a limit to art's capacity to beautify: "one kind of ugliness alone," he writes, "is incapable of being represented conformably to nature without destroying all aesthetic delight, and consequently artistic beauty, namely, that which excites *disgust*." The sensation of disgust, Kant argues, rests not on the qualities of the object alone but upon the imagination's experience of the object "as insisting, as it were, upon our enjoying it."³¹ This is the very property that Woolf, Bowerbank and others have identified in Cavendish's work. Its "narcissistic" self-insistence is suggested in visions of the spreading cucumber, the "tedious chaos" of *The Blazing World*'s plot, and the outlandish rejuvenation process. For Kant, then, the concept of disgust is important because it marks the formal limits of his aesthetic schema. If the object that incites disgust is incapable of being presented as beautiful, all art that works in this area risks misunderstanding and rejection—it functions, to repeat Attridge's definition of singularity, "beyond the possibilities pre-programmed by a culture's norms."³² *The Blazing World* fits into this category very neatly, but its singularity is, *contra* Woolf and Bowerbank, of a productive rather than destructive kind.

The point here is that *The Blazing World* is just singular enough, particularly in the context of its time, to be important, but not too singular to be dismissed as meaningless. As Jacques Derrida points out in “Economimesis,” his re-reading of Kant’s third critique, disgust is not simply what cannot be represented in a pleasing manner, but “the absolute other of the system.” Derrida asserts that disgust “is unrepresentable. At the same time it is unnameable in its singularity.”³³ Here Cavendish’s favored term “singularity” once again takes on a pejorative inflection, since according to Derrida it is a quality that belongs to that which cannot even be comprehended by an aesthetics of beauty. Indeed, Derrida goes on to argue that disgust, latterly termed “vomit” to indicate its alienation from Derrida’s concept of “exemplorality”—the exemplary status of orality in Western metaphysics—is a place-holding term for an utterly unassimilable otherness that cannot even be put into words. He notes, “this impossibility cannot be said to be some thing, something sensible or intelligible, that could fall under one or the other senses or under some concept.”³⁴ Thus for Derrida “vomit” has neither the power to restore youth and beauty nor the power to disgust: the term is nothing more than a sign of absence and a reminder that there are some things that will forever remain outside the system of representation. Given the radical otherness of this concept, it is clear that the singularity of disgust as Derrida understands it cannot be a quality of a work of literature, which must by definition remain “something sensible or intelligible.” No matter how idiosyncratic its style, how outlandish its ideas, or how unpleasant its descriptions, *The Blazing World* is certainly sensible and intelligible. Not only that but, as I will go on to demonstrate, a place for it can be found at the very center of Kant’s aesthetics. From such a perspective Cavendish is clearly not working in the realms of alterity or unrepresentability, and this being the case *The Blazing World* cannot be understood as prompting disgust in a Kantian or Derridean sense. Instead, its guiding principle is generosity, and its key purpose is to act as a gift.

Generosity and Genius

While in Kant's terms Cavendish's approach is neither disgusting nor narcissistic, it can be mapped onto another aspect of his writing on the fine arts, namely the relationship between the artistic genius, the artwork, and the context within which that work is created (where context encompasses both "nature," understood as the source from which the artist's talent emanates, and the society in which her day-to-day needs must be met). Kant's interest in the topic begins in section 46 of his *Critique*, where he sets out the connection between fine art, genius, and originality:

genius (1) is a *talent* for producing that for which no definite rule can be given: and not an aptitude in the way of cleverness for what can be learned according to some rule; and that consequently *originality* must be its primary property. (2) Since there may be original nonsense, its products must at the same time be models, i.e. be *exemplary*; and, consequently, though not themselves derived from imitation, they must serve that purpose for others. . . .(3) It cannot indicate scientifically how it brings about its product, but rather gives the rule as *nature*. (4) Nature prescribes the rule through genius not to science but to art, and this is only in so far as it is to be fine art.³⁵

Points (3) and (4), which locate the concept of genius in the realm of the arts rather than the sciences, might be incidental in a discussion of any other author, but for Cavendish they are highly relevant. A writer of works of natural philosophy, as well as drama, poetry and imaginative prose, Cavendish was familiar with the limits of the various genres within which she worked. Indeed, she suggests that *The Blazing World* was written to complement the scientific ideas that she was interested in. The text was first published in 1666 as an appendix to her *Observations on Experimental Philosophy*, and in her prologue to the fictional work she suggests that, while *The Blazing World* might serve as a form of recreation, its value lies in its combination of the rational and the creative:

the end of reason, is truth; the end of fancy, is fiction: but mistake me not, when I distinguish *fancy* from *reason*; I mean not as if fancy were not made by the rational parts of matter; but by *reason* I understand a rational search and enquiry into the causes of natural

effects: and by *fancy* a voluntary creation or production of the mind, both being effects, or rather actions of the rational parts of matter.³⁶

The distinction that Cavendish draws here is very close to that made by Kant in his point (3) above. Cavendish suggests that artistic creation, while not an irrational nor, as Kant puts it in point (2), a nonsensical act, is nevertheless not a methodical process of the type called for by scientific enquiry. Works of literature cannot “indicate scientifically” how they come about; instead, they call into being something that has never before existed and which acts as a precedent for future artists.

The formal and thematic properties of Cavendish’s text are certainly unprecedented. Kant claims in point (1) that the primary quality of a work of artistic genius should be originality, and this is demonstrably the case for *The Blazing World*. Whether filed under the heading of science fiction or utopian writing, Cavendish’s singular novel broke new ground. It was “the first fictional portrayal of women and the new science”³⁷ and Cavendish herself “the first identifiable female SF author, the creator of a bold SF vision.”³⁸ While his first requirement for genius is that nothing like the artwork must have come before it, Kant’s second asserts that something very like it must come after: the artwork must act as an exemplar. While it would be going too far to claim that the genre of the female utopia took its inspiration exclusively from *The Blazing World*, the text, as Sarasohn acknowledges, “anticipated modern writers of science fiction from Mary Shelley to Ursula Le Guin.”³⁹ And the concept of describing an entirely alien world in detail has of course been imitated numerous times since Cavendish. Moreover, *The Blazing World* itself takes the principle of imitation very seriously. In the main text the Empress exhorts the Duchess to create her own fictional worlds to enjoy and, crucially, the same invitation is extended to the reader at the end of the novel:

if any should like the world I have made, and be willing to be my subjects, they may imagine themselves such, and they are such, I mean in their minds, fancies or imaginations; but if they cannot endure to be subjects, they may create worlds of their own, and govern themselves as they please.⁴⁰

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It is pleasant to imagine Mary Shelley, Le Guin and others taking this advice. The character of the Duchess certainly does take it, as we are told she “resolved to make a world of her own invention.”⁴¹

Cavendish would have agreed with some of what Kant says about genius. In *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* she notes “Art itself is natural, and an effect of Nature,” a principle upon which Kant’s approach to genius is founded. However, Cavendish goes on to suggest that art “cannot produce any thing that is beyond, or not within Nature.”⁴² In this she parts company with much subsequent, and some contemporaneous, aesthetic theory. For Derrida, the Kantian conception of the original and inspiring genius is founded upon the principle that “the artist does not imitate things in nature, or, if you will, in *natura naturata* [nature already created], but the acts of *natura naturans* [nature in the active sense], the operations of the *physis* [nature]. . . . *mimesis* displays the identification of human action with divine action.”⁴³ While Cavendish contradicts them, these ideas would have been familiar to an early modern readership, perhaps through their most famous expression in Philip Sidney’s *An Apology for Poetry*, where the singularity of the writer is foregrounded: “only the poet . . . lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect into another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew forms such as never were in nature.”⁴⁴ Notwithstanding Cavendish’s reluctance to acknowledge it in *Observations*, this is a particularly apposite description of her project in *The Blazing World*: she has “grown into” another nature by imitating its creative power rather than its creations, as the fantastically varied forms of life that populate the Blazing World testify. In doing so, Cavendish’s singular force of will outdoes that of conquerors such as Alexander and Caesar to approximate, in Derrida’s terms, the position of God—a point also made by Sidney when he refers to the poet’s “divine breath.”⁴⁵ In pursuing the analogy between the artist who creates by imitating the power of nature, and the Judeo-Christian God who has created the power of nature in the first place, Derrida offers a reading of Kant that illuminates not only the creative process in general, but

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also Cavendish's methodology in particular. In keeping with his interest in "exemplorality," Derrida begins by highlighting the importance of "voice," but the implications of the passage soon accrete:

the genius poet is the voice of God who gives him voice, who gives himself and by giving gives to himself, gives himself what he gives, gives himself the [power] to give (*Gabe* and *es gibt*), plays freely with himself, only breaks the finite circle or contractual exchange in order to strike an infinite accord with himself.⁴⁶

Here Derrida sets out a vision of creativity that seems remarkably self-indulgent. In these terms poetry (which following Sidney I will interpret to mean all imaginative writing) is an economy of gift exchange in which, paradoxically, the gifts are exchanged between one person only.

Derrida's point is that this never-ending system of auto-affection underwrites all acts of literary creation, but his words seem especially applicable to *The Blazing World*. First, of course, they recast the charges of Woolf and Bowerbank in a new and far more positive light. No longer the mark of a repulsive narcissism, Cavendish's singularity is revealed to be in the purest auto-affective spirit of literature itself. Bowerbank's self-consuming poisonous spider and Woolf's disgustingly self-indulgent cucumber are replaced, via Derrida, by an image of the self-giving, playful genius. Second, and more specifically, the novel's peculiar tripling of Cavendish's identity into the figures of narrator, Empress, and Duchess becomes more than an egocentric quirk of composition. Instead, the trope bears a close resemblance to the self-focused circulation of gifts that Derrida outlines. One act of "giving-to-oneself" can be seen in Cavendish's creation of *The Blazing World*. Here the author is in the position of God—it is she, after all, who has given life to this world and voice to its Empress. But in composing an Empress who fulfils Cavendish's own sovereign desires, the author gives to herself in a more profound way. This auto-affection goes beyond semi-autobiographical wish-fulfilment because it elaborates, and ultimately closes, a circuit of giving-to-oneself: Margaret Cavendish, the real-life Duchess of Newcastle, gives life to an Empress who is an avatar of her author; that Empress in turn gives life to a character called the Duchess of Newcastle; the literary skill of that Duchess will be used to give life to the Empress's writing project, a "poetical or

romantical cabbala, wherein you can use metaphors, allegories, similitudes,” which may be understood as *The Blazing World* itself.⁴⁷ The text acts as a locus wherein Cavendish “gives (to) herself, gives herself what she gives, gives herself the power to give.”

Two further moments from Kant’s treatment of aesthetics prove instructive in a discussion of Cavendish’s work. In section 51 of the *Critique*, “On division of the fine arts,” Kant broaches the subject of value (both exchange value and surplus value) as it pertains to fine art. He notes first that fine art must be “free art . . . opposed to remunerated work.” Second, any economy involving the poet will never be an efficient one, since the poet always produces value in excess of what was expected. Kant suggests that the arts of speech consist of rhetoric and poetry. In contrast to the orator, who promises to deal in matters of the understanding but in the end only offers decorative language, the poet promises nothing more than a play with ideas, but “accomplishes something more worthy of being made a serious business, namely, the using of play to provide food for the understanding, and the giving of life to its concepts by means of the imagination. Hence the orator in reality performs less than he promises, the poet more.”⁴⁸ In Derrida’s terms, God “furnishes [the poet] his capital, produces and reproduces his labor force, gives him surplus value and his means of giving surplus value.”⁴⁹ This question of surplus value returns us to the accusations levelled at *The Blazing World* by Woolf and Bowerbank. For them, the superabundance of the novel was monstrous and disgusting; for Derrida, after Kant, it is an act of generosity, the inevitable consequence of the genius poet’s entrance into the natural auto-affective circuit of creation-as-giving. Gallagher also notices this aspect of Cavendish’s style, albeit in different terms. While conceding that it may “dizzy the reader,” she argues that the complex representation of the self found in *The Blazing World* is not, as it may at first appear, mere “original nonsense”; instead, “that which seems the undoing of the stability of the self is that which allows subjectivity to come into existence as an excessiveness of consciousness in relationship to all objects but especially in relationship to itself as object.”⁵⁰ Gallagher’s point is thus that the “excessiveness of consciousness” present in *The Blazing World*’s multiplication of the Duchess figure is fundamental to the text’s

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value as an original investigation of the vexed status of early modern female subjectivity. It is difficult to disagree with this conclusion; however, the excess value that Gallagher identifies is not present merely in relation to the self. In fact, the principle of generosity pervades the entirety of the text.

Derrida's reading of Kant helps once more to identify the extent of Cavendish's comprehensive generosity. The relationship between poetry and value is the "economimesis" of Derrida's title, and the role he allots to God in this economy is one of a beneficent patron: God gives of and to Himself in his creation of the artistic genius, and his generosity overflows through the poet who forever produces art in excess of what is demanded of her. Derrida posits the reproduction of this system in the social structure of the perfect city. Overseen by a benign ruler who is himself a poet-king, the city functions for Derrida as an earthly analogue of the relationship between God and the genius. Derrida points out the significance of this relationship for Kant, referring to the fact that one of the few poets quoted in the third critique is Frederick the Great, the reigning monarch of Kant's Germany and enthusiastic patron of arts and letters. The lines Kant quotes include an injunction to "Leav[e] the universe overflowing with our benefactions," a sentiment in keeping with the abundance of creative power already set out in his discussion of fine art.⁵¹ Derrida sums this idea up in the phrase "helio-poetics," in which the cosmic origin and (comparative) inexhaustibility of the gift of poetic energy is well-captured.

The notion of helio-poetics recalls a curious passage at the start of *The Blazing World*, where the narrator describes the means by which the protagonist travels from her home world to the planet of which she will soon become an Empress. No special vehicle, knowledge, or skill is necessary for such transit because the worlds are connected at their poles, in much the same way as a string of pearls might be; indeed, the suggestion is that the number of worlds connected in this way is much greater than two. Fearful that this cosmology should be mocked on the grounds that those living at the poles of these worlds would see two suns—one sun that shines on their own world, and one that lights their adjacent neighbor—and that their proximity to one another might be

dangerous, the narrator clarifies the arrangement by explaining, first, that the planets each move in “peculiar circles” to prevent collisions and, second, that

although they should meet, yet we in this world cannot so well perceive them, by reason of the brightness of our sun, which being nearer to us, obstructs the splendour of the suns of the other worlds, they being too far off to be discerned by our optic perception, except we use very good telescopes, by which skilful astronomers have often observed two or three suns at once.⁵²

Cavendish is referring here to the atmospheric phenomenon of the parhelion, mock sun or “sun-dog.” Parhelia are caused by the refraction of light from air-borne ice crystals, and typically appear as a pair of bright lights on either side of a low sun.⁵³ Their cause was not fully understood at the time Cavendish was writing; however, in *Meteorology*, Descartes proposes that they are caused by a giant ring of solid ice in the sky acting as a lens.⁵⁴ While certainly playful, Cavendish’s resolution of this scientific puzzle by invoking “the suns of the other worlds” reveals a further kind of imaginative overabundance.⁵⁵ Given her famous interest in science and her suggestion that reason is preserved within fancy, it could be construed that the remarkable cosmology of *The Blazing World* has been constructed solely in order to explain the mysterious accounts of parhelia. Whether she invites her readership to take the idea seriously or not, a chain of worlds each with its own source of solar energy would certainly seem to account for parhelia perceived through telescopes. The presence in the text of this overcompensating and seemingly superfluous detail can be accounted for in two ways, one fictional, the other metafictional. Either the fictional universe of *The Blazing World* is controlled by a deity who has created an infinite chain of worlds each warmed by its own sun, or the text itself has been created by an author with such an extravagant creative aesthetic that myriad new worlds have been called into existence simply to account for an unexplained atmospheric phenomenon.⁵⁶ Ultimately, whether or not we read this moment as metafictional is beside the point; in each case the abiding impression is one of superlative generosity emanating from a benevolent creator. Like the description quoted earlier in which Cavendish’s narrative

refused to turn away from the disgusting effects of the rejuvenating gum, this account of parhelia is excessive. Rather than reading such gestures as self-obsessed or repulsive, they should be seen for what they are: the gifts of a supremely original creative figure. That figure is far closer to the God-poet or poet-king than the text has been given credit for. So while Cavendish has often been understood as the singular writer of a singular fictional world, her position as a singular patron is just as worthy of emphasis.

Patronage and Friendship

Lisa T. Sarasohn notes that patronage “was a uniquely potent weapon for a woman. Although women were blocked from participation in the formal institutions of government and education, patronage gave them access to power and learning.”⁵⁷ *The Blazing World* is a fiction constructed with the overriding purpose of representing Cavendish as a beneficent patron. The exemplary nature of the text, particularly its epilogue, has already been remarked upon, but the importance of Cavendish’s altruism is expressed throughout in what Khanna calls “the generative power of female friendship,” a power that has much in common with generosity of Kant’s artistic genius and Derrida’s sun-king.⁵⁸ This power can be seen most clearly in the text’s prologue, where Cavendish-as-narrator turns her attention to the supposed spoils of the Blazing World: “as for the rocks of diamonds, I wish with all my soul they might be shared amongst my noble female friends.”⁵⁹ This wish is in fact reminiscent of a practice that was commonplace during the period: the mutual exchange of gifts amongst aristocratic women. As Jane Donawerth points out,

Letters by sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century English women show that women participated in and even managed a precapitalist gift-exchange system that was still a fundamental basis of English social life and economy. Centered on the family but extending across all classes to the family’s political affiliations, the system circulated food, cloth and clothing, jewelry, animals, medicines, cash, prayers, relics, and favors.⁶⁰

The idea that her female friends might be able to receive jewels discovered in *The Blazing World* once again blurs the boundaries between fiction and fact, calling attention to the generosity of Cavendish the person and Cavendish the creator of a world abundant with riches. As a form of political and social networking, the exchange of gifts and favors between aristocratic women was a much more egalitarian enterprise than the hierarchical patronage system invoked in Frederick the Great's notion of leaving the universe "overflowing with our benefactions." While, according to Frederick's poem, the gifts of the sun-king may be the origin of generosity, for Cavendish that generous impulse lives on in the behavior of the universe itself.

A better known system of patronly generosity also appealed to Margaret Cavendish. With their country retreats, literary salons and family connections, female literary patrons of the pre-civil war years such as Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, and Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford, presented Cavendish with a model of widely beneficent noble womanhood that her circumstances during the interregnum prevented her from attaining. But as Katie Whittaker makes clear, by the time of the publication of *The Blazing World* Cavendish "had attained celebrity as an aristocratic patron of letters," becoming the patron of Dryden, Shadwell, Flecknoe and other prominent writers.⁶¹ In *The Blazing World*, Cavendish represents herself in the role of literary patron as the Empress, taking another version of her fictionalized self, the Duchess, under her wing. And her relish for beneficence stretches yet further: in the same passage that imagines the dissemination of Blazing World jewels, Cavendish also fantasizes about playing patron to her own husband. In a re-working of the situation they found themselves in before the Restoration, when the lands her husband owned had been lost to the parliamentarians, Cavendish aims to salvage from the world as much gold as will "suffice to repair my noble lord and husband's losses."⁶² Cavendish's fixation with the power of generosity even extends to the Empress's military campaigns, which are reminiscent of exercises in patronage.⁶³ The Empress conquers the foes of her homeland by using Blazing World technology to stage a dazzling masque-like appearance "upon the face of the

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An even better known

waters,” just as James I and Charles I relied upon Inigo Jones’s advances in stage technology to create impressive court performances.⁶⁴

Despite these instances of the wide-ranging nature of patronage in the text, the Empress’s most prominent patronage relationship is with the Duchess. While the term “singularity” remains a useful one to define the uniqueness of Cavendish’s role as author, it can lead to misunderstandings. The word has so far been used here, as by most critics, in the sense given by the *OED* 7 definition: “the fact or quality of differing or dissenting from others or from what is generally accepted.” An allied definition can be found in the *OED* 13 entry for “singular:” “different from or not complying with that which is customary, usual, or general; strange, odd, peculiar,” a usage illustrated in the *OED* by John Evelyn’s description of Cavendish’s “extravagant humor & dresse, which was very singular.”⁶⁵ “Singular” is thus certainly an appropriate word to indicate the remarkable, eccentric and unique nature of Cavendish’s work, but of course it can also be used in the sense of *OED* 2, “One only; one and no more; single,” to refer to the solitary position of Cavendish or her avatar the Empress. While this may have been true of Cavendish’s personal situation, one of the effects of *The Blazing World* is to diminish this sense of her as a separate, lonely individual. The associations with others prompted by the connections of patronage certainly do discourage this, but the emphasis the text places upon the “intimate friendship” of the Empress and the Duchess and their status as “platonic lovers” trumps that network.⁶⁶ Here the preeminent language of metaphysical amity is deployed to communicate a sense of the closeness of the relationship the two characters have. Platonic love was grounded upon an intimate spiritual communication between two people that disregarded their physical form, and in this case such closeness was made all the more convenient by the fact that it is only the Duchess’s soul, and not her body, that travels to the Blazing World. This reference to Platonic relations brings with it a discourse that casts the concept of singularity in a different light. Rachel Trubowitz perceptively notes that “if for Cavendish the female subject is absolute monarch over its inward kingdom, female friendship is the intimate pairing of two such singular, self-governing, incorporeal subjectivities.”⁶⁷ Laurie J. Shannon’s work on sovereign amity

bolsters this claim. As she points out, “singular” could also mean “self-sufficient,” a necessary quality for anyone who desired to live up to the ideals of friendship espoused by the Classical tradition, and one partially reflected in the *OED* 10 definition of “singular” as “especially good or great.”⁶⁸ Shannon suggests that such individuals avail themselves of the language of sovereignty, and this view matches Gallagher’s influential reading of Cavendish’s tendency towards sovereign-like absolutism. Gallagher argues that “the subject, in order to be absolute, must have subjects,” and the Empress’s position as *de facto* ruler of the Blazing World certainly provides them (Gallagher 30).⁶⁹ Yet Shannon’s view of sovereignty offers a more generous alternative to absolutist rule. She argues that, rather than subjects, an individual possessed of an absolutist singularity ultimately seeks a relationship of “sovereign amity” predicated upon equality with another person. For Shannon such a duality offers a more egalitarian way of conceiving of a political community than Gallagher envisages: “this sovereign singularity, gathered, perfected, master of accidents, and superior to need, proceeds to a nonobvious step: he finds another similarly situated and merges with him.”⁷⁰ Shannon offers examples from Cicero, Shakespeare and Montaigne to demonstrate how individuals who understand themselves as singular sovereigns find enrichment in perfect friendship alone. As Price puts it, “the interior sovereign states of both Duchess and Empress are thus separate and yet contain each other.”⁷¹

However, here Margaret Cavendish faced a problem: she is singular in three senses of the word mentioned thus far. At once peculiar, self-sufficient and “one only; one and no more,” she was unable to find “another similarly situated” to “merge” with her in a relationship of perfect friendship, because there was no one similarly situated to her. This is the difficult position that monarchs find themselves in, as Francis Bacon and, much later, Alan Bray observed.⁷² Cavendish’s solution, akin to the generous principles of self-giving established by Kant, developed by Derrida and embodied in the characters of the Empress and the Duchess, is to create a friend for herself, and to create herself as a friend. Through the medium of fiction, she transforms the difficult fact of her own singularity into a liberating fiction of sovereign amity. While this may at first appear to be an

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egotistical and even disconcerting gesture, it has a clear grounding in Classical philosophy, just as Kant and Derrida show that Cavendish's style is not a disgusting aberration from Western aesthetics but in fact an articulation of fundamental principles of artistic creativity. Cavendish's singularity may signify in many ways, but the term cannot be used as a shorthand for artistic ineptitude. Rather than seeing *The Blazing World* as an insular dead-end, from an aesthetic point of view it can be read as a generous and generative exemplar both for women's literary achievement and the literary mode that would come to be known as science fiction.

¹ William Bray, ed., *The Diary of John Evelyn*, vol. 2 (London: Dent, 1952), 25.

² Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson, eds., *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader* (Ontario: Broadview, 2000), 92.

³ Emma Rees, *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Genre, Exile* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 179.

⁴ Sara Heller Mendelson, *The Mental World of Stuart Women: Three Studies* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), 38, 43.

⁵ Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing and Fiction, 1660–1800* (London: Virago, 1989), 57.

⁶ Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 7.

⁷ Lisa T. Sarasohn, *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish: Reason and Fancy During the Scientific Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 22.

⁸ Margaret Cavendish, *The Description of a New World Called the Blazing World and Other Writings*, ed. Kate Lilley (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 218.

⁹ Rachel Trubowitz, "The Reenchantment of Utopia and the Female Monarchical Self: Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 11 (1992): 240.

¹⁰ Oddvar Holmesland, "Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World*: Natural Art and the Body Politic," *Studies in Philology* 96 (1999): 460.

¹¹ Cavendish, *Blazing World*, xxiv.

¹² Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2004), 63.

¹³ Jeffrey Masten, *Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), 162.

¹⁴ See Jane Kneller, *Kant and the Power of the Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 151–60.

¹⁵ Alan Sinfield, *Shakespeare, Authority, Sexuality: Unfinished Business in Cultural Materialism* (London: Routledge, 2006), 198.

¹⁶ Bowerbank refers to "The Epistle Dedicatory" in *Poems and Fancies, Natures Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil* (126) and *True Relation* (29).

¹⁷ Bowerbank, 397 quoting Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub and other Satires*, ed. Kathleen Williams (London, 1975), 114.

¹⁸ Bowerbank, 402, 403.

¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 2000), 62.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

²¹ Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 218.

²² Judith Kegan Gardiner, "'Singularity of Self': Cavendish's *True Relation*, Narcissism, and the Gendering of Individualism," *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660–1700* 21 (1997): 55–61.

²³ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁴ Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 124.

²⁵ Lee Cullen Khanna, "The Subject of Utopia: Margaret Cavendish and her Blazing-World," in *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women*, ed. Jane L. Donawerth and Carol A. Kolmerton (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 21.

²⁶ Catherine Gallagher, "Embracing the Absolute: The Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth-Century England," *Genders* 1 (1988): 28.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 224.

²⁹ The author's sex and the active role played in the narrative by a woman certainly did contribute to the scorn Cavendish's works received from early readers, but I am not addressing those judgments here. And I am certainly not

suggesting that such prejudices are shared by Woolf or Bowerbank. My interest instead is in dealing with the discomfort that modern readers, even those broadly sympathetic to Cavendish's project, have with *The Blazing World*.

³⁰ Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 155–56.

³¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, rev. and ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 141.

³² Attridge, 63.

³³ Jacques Derrida, "Economimesis," trans. R. Klein, *Diacritics*, 11 (1982): 22.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁵ Kant, 136–37.

³⁶ Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 213–14.

³⁷ Bowerbank and Mendelson, 26.

³⁸ Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 48.

³⁹ Sarasohn, 196.

⁴⁰ Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 224–25.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁴² Margaret Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London, 1668), 260–61.

⁴³ Derrida, 9. Bracketed translations mine.

⁴⁴ Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, 3rd edn, ed. R.W. Maslen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 85.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴⁶ Derrida, 11. Square brackets and parentheses in original.

⁴⁷ Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 183.

⁴⁸ Kant, 150. Derrida deals with this passage on p. 11 of his text.

⁴⁹ Derrida, 12.

⁵⁰ Gallagher, 33.

⁵¹ Derrida, 12. In its original French, the line reads "En laissant l'univers comblé de nos bienfaits."

⁵² Cavendish, 126.

⁵³ I take issue with Elizabeth A. Spiller's argument that here Cavendish sends up the astronomer and his telescope. Referring to the passage quoted immediately above, Spiller states "the suggestion that astronomers could see the *Blazing World* through their 'very good Telescopes' in the same way that they sometimes see 'two or three suns at once' transforms scientific discovery into optical illusion. . . . Cavendish insists that it is not astronomers with telescopes, but instead perhaps more 'skillful' readers with texts" who will discover her world. Elizabeth A. Spiller, *Science, Reading and Renaissance Literature: The Art of Making Knowledge, 1580–1670* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 166. However, *The Blazing World* may not support this reading: because of the passage's syntactical ambiguity, the narrator may be suggesting that astronomers cannot see Cavendish's new worlds at all. What they could see, rather, are "the suns of the other worlds," i.e., the parhelion effect (called "parahelion" [sic] by Spiller). Notwithstanding the Empress's skepticism of magnification elsewhere in the text, here the narrator does not seem to me to cast doubt on telescopes or astronomers. Indeed, it is astronomers, not readers (who do not appear in the passage) who are called skillful.

⁵⁴ Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, eds., *Oeuvres de Descartes*, rev. ed., vol. 6 (Paris: Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1964–76), 355.

⁵⁵ Bronwen Price detects a similar overabundance in the construction of the *Blazing World*'s moon that, she points out, possesses "its own source of light". Bronwen Price, "Journeys Beyond Frontiers: Knowledge, Subjectivity and Outer Space in Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666)," in *The Arts of 17th-century Science: Representations of the Natural World in European and North American Culture*, ed. Claire Jowitt and Diane Watt (Farnham: Ashgate, 2002), 131.

⁵⁶ Cavendish's strategy anticipates the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics, formulated in 1957 by Hugh Everett, which solves the "Schrödinger's Cat" paradox by asserting that the cat is both alive and dead in two separate, newly branched universes.

⁵⁷ Sarasohn, 151.

⁵⁸ Khanna, 31.

⁵⁹ Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 124.

⁶⁰ Jane Donawerth, "Women's Poetry and the Tudor-Stuart System of Gift Exchange," in *Women, Writing, and the Reproduction of Culture in Tudor and Stuart Britain*, ed. Mary E. Burke, Jane Donawerth, Linda L. Dove, and Karen Nelson (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 3.

⁶¹ Katie Whitaker, *Mad Madge: Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, Royalist, Writer and Romantic* (London: Vintage, 2004), 325–26.

⁶² Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 124. In fact, these losses were restored by the crown in 1660.

⁶³ Bowerbank and Mendelson, 18–19.

⁶⁴ Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 211.

⁶⁵ *OED* quotes from John Evelyn's 1667 Diary.

⁶⁶ Cavendish, *Blazing World*, 183.

⁶⁷ Trubowitz, 239.

⁶⁸ Laurie J. Shannon, *Sovereign Amity: Figures of Friendship in Shakespearean Contexts* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), 30–38.

⁶⁹ Gallagher, 30.

⁷⁰ Shannon, 38.

⁷¹ Price, 140.

⁷² See Bacon, “Of Friendship” and “Of Followers and Friends” (390–6, 436–7) and Bray (40–61).

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